

More letters from lockdown Creative responses to Covid-19 by Jane Meagher, Jo McFarlane, Rosie Meade

Covid 19: Dilemmas for a Developing country

Coming out of Dar es Salaam airport into a hot, humid night in October 2020, I was relieved to have taken off the mask I had compulsorily worn since I had left Edinburgh in the early hours of the morning. I had had my temperature checked when we landed and filled in a form to say where I would be staying. That was the end of any restrictions or checks, despite the fact that the world was in the middle of a pandemic which had claimed so many lives and destroyed livelihoods.

When I got back home to Edinburgh, people asked questions about Covid restrictions in Tanzania and were clearly surprised and even shocked to hear that there were none. Why would a country not protect its citizens from this disease? Why would its President encourage people to pray together in crowded churches? Why not impose lockdowns and restrictions for their safety?

I don't by any means claim to be an expert on Tanzania or Covid 19. I have a daughter, grandson and son-in-law there, as well as friends. I have visited on many occasions over the last eight years and grown to love that beautiful, vibrant, impoverished country with its largely peaceful history and generally friendly and welcoming people. So my observations are based solely on those visits and discussions with family and friends. It seems to me that the issues facing citizens and decision makers in a country like Tanzania are markedly different to those in wealthy countries like ours.

When the disease first appeared, schools in Tanzania closed, as did airports. However, these restrictions were lifted within a couple of months or so; the President stopped counting cases of the infection and, in June 2020, declared the country Covid-free. The fact is that conditions in Tanzania - politically, socially, economically - are so different to what we have in Scotland that a little understanding reveals the stark nature of the choices and challenges faced by the majority of Tanzanians, and indeed by politicians, during the pandemic.

Tanzania is home to some of Africa's most famous natural attractions like Mount Kilimanjaro, the Serengeti National Park and the island of Zanzibar. But the majority of Tanzania's 56 million people have never visited these areas so popular with tourists, because the cost is prohibitive and because the demands of daily life rule out anything other than local relaxation. 68% of the population live below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day. In practical terms, this means that life is a daily struggle to put food on the table. Put simply, if people don't work, they starve. So, if faced with a choice between staying at home so as to reduce the risk of getting the virus but facing the certainty of not being able to feed your family, or going to work to run the risk of getting a virus that may or may not have symptoms which may or may not be serious,

it's clear what most people would choose. Poverty the world over is a harsh and hard-hearted master.

It's also true that Tanzanians are used to living alongside serious, life threatening illness, often with little or no access to medical treatment. Each year, 10 to 12 million people contract malaria in Tanzania and 80,000 die from the disease, most of them children. As yet, the world has failed to develop a vaccine against malaria. Tuberculosis and diabetes are also common and most people cannot afford or access the medical treatment they need.

It is difficult to know what the actual rate of Covid 19 infection is because, unlike other countries in the region, the Tanzanian Government stopped publishing figures on 29 April 2020. There are many factors which may affect the allegedly low number of Covid 19 infections in Tanzania. One is demographic; the average age being 18 years and life expectancy at birth 65.46 years, and we know that young people tend to have less severe Covid symptoms. Another is lifestyle - much of social and other interaction happens outdoors, and we know that transmission is easier in confined indoor spaces. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that vitamin D, a vitamin we get from exposure to sunlight, has a role to play in reducing the severity of Covid 19 and there is plenty of sun in Tanzania.

As we know, the story of this virus and its restrictions change regularly. As I write, I am hearing that the new South African variant has, inevitably, arrived in Tanzania and rumours abound of deaths and over-stretched hospital services. Tanzania is now on the list of countries from which travelers to the UK are barred, with the exception of British nationals, who must quarantine in hotels at their own expense. There are particular challenges for Tanzania, whose President has announced that God has eliminated Covid in the country and accused those who have been vaccinated overseas of bringing the virus back into Tanzania. The Tanzanian Catholic Church, of which the President is a member, has in the last week made a public statement urging the public to take precautions against the virus.

The development, in record time and increasing frequency, of vaccines holds hope for those countries that can afford to buy and dispense them and, eventually, for the rest of the world. Whilst we are rightly optimistic about the possibility of a return to some sort of normality, thanks to those vaccines, it would be a cause for equal celebration in vast swathes of the world if a vaccine for diseases like malaria could be found as urgently.

Jane Meagher

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Our Finest Hour?

When people look back years from now
nostalgically to ask us how
we coped with lockdown, braved Corona
Like Churchill smoked a fat Havana?

Or Kitchener, did point the finger?
In crowded parks forbidden linger?
When we were asked to stay at home
did we comply or rashly roam?

to supermarkets, flout the call?
Stock up on excess toilet roll
Take up our thread and needles, sew
Neath home-made face masks hide our glow?

On Thursday nights our carers clap?
On social media zoom and zap?
Proudly front our stacked bookshelves
Replete with reference to ourselves

How will our generation fare
With hindsight of posterity's glare?
Our country needed us to fight the virus
Brave the blitz, surround the wireless

Listen to the daily briefing,
Mourn the dead in Inverkeithing
With gratitude praise Rishi Sunak
or curse the blunders of Matt Hancock

Salute our infamous Eton Mess
His glorious resurrection bless
With courage did we meet the task
of doing our bit, or stop to ask:

When can we get back to normal?
six feet apart, stop being so formal?
Ease the lockdown, lift the lid
Reconnect the national grid

Why lay our lives down sacrificial?
Duh! The economy, stupid!

Jo McFarlane
Activist Poet

Missing Funerals 2020

You said it was
The funerals
You miss the most.
A neighbour gone,
And now you find
Yourselves grieving,
Country people,
On country roads,
Grief's battalions,
Waiting, waking.
Out at your gate.
Pillar of salt,
Defiant beauty,
In your last look,
At a life lived
And left behind.

Hearse carries on.

As if this gesture could replace
The huddled incantations over
Fresh earth, your prayers for those gone.
Retreat indoors, vulnerable,
Rosaries to be said all alone.
 At funerals, you saw the point
 Of it, all that repetition,
 The group acts in *memorial*,
 Will they be lost, forgotten now,
 That you stay outside, stay behind?

Hearse carries on.

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